

THE FAITH DIRECTION
Revelation 21:1-8; Hebrews 12:1-2
April 23, 1978

Arthur M. Romig
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

You have been very good in the past to allow me to speak very directly and personally to you, the good people of the Broad Street Church. So today again give me the privilege to be very personal. Where do we start?

Perhaps because I am older than my colleagues you might think that I would be rather nostalgic about the past and what we in the Church said and did years ago. This is Passover for our Jewish brothers and sisters and it is a time when the backward look would be appropriate. But as they are reminded of past deliverance, they look forward to future freedom. But let us examine our faith and see if that is the direction of our search for guidance.

Through the years of my ministry and especially in the past decade or two I have heard not once, but again and again, this refrain: "Get back to the fundamentals of our faith." My problem, however, when faced with this remark is that I am not sure just where we have left the fundamentals. If we have, we certainly must get back to them. Of course, some people have forgotten them and some perhaps never knew them in the first place. Sometimes I feel like the man who was asked if he had become reconciled with God, and he replied, "I didn't know that we had ever quarreled."

But there are many that feel that we have quarreled with God and have deserted the fundamental precepts of our Christian faith. Please don't think that I take this lightly. Through my years of ministry - and they have been many and varied - I have searched myself, together with what we say and do in the Church, very deeply. I know that you do not want to believe or live superficially. Nor do I. I want to live according to the very essence of life, to drink of it deeply and enjoy it fully. I want to go as deeply as I know how, to the very center of the Christian faith and then to live faithfully as close to that center as I can. This means acceptance, followed by obedience to the Good News of the Gospel. I always recognize that I may be mistaken about what is central but I also firmly believe in a living Spirit who will direct us to what is fundamental, if we keep our minds alert, our eyes open and our ears free from wax. Do you remember that old hymn that meant much to me in my youth, "Where He leads me I will follow?" Seldom have I felt the need more to be led by the Spirit than I have these past decades or two. Never have I tried to be more open to the wind of God's Spirit, and I believe it must be true for you also, in these fast moving days of change.

So today let me share with you some of the things that have been going through my mind to help me answer the question I pose in this sermon: "What is the direction we must take to discover the fundamentals of our faith?" I will not attempt to give a list of what is fundamental, but only point out what the Scriptures say to me to be the direction we take to find them. Is it to the right or to the left? Is it forward or backward? Where are the essential elements of faith to which I must cling to be a Christian in these days? From the way the question is usually presented to me the logical answer comes, "Back to the fundamentals", as though we have to look backward to a bygone day when we were more firmly rooted and secure. Who among us, who has passed the age of fifty, or perhaps even forty, has not wished for simpler and less confusing days - First and Second World Wars - were much more easily understood than our more recent engagements. We seem to have simpler reasons even for the great depression of the 30's than for our economic problems today. We have become enmeshed in the total life of the world in strange and complex ways, and we become frightened.

The problems we face today are not really new but they seem new to us. They are in a different context and on a wider scope. We face the problems of hunger and poverty not just in our country but in India, Africa and around the world; we struggle with over-population, not so much here as in the undeveloped countries with population control in Brazil, Mexico, India and world wide. We struggle with peace, not between our states, but in the Middle East. We try to understand crime in our land but our attention goes to kidnapping in Italy, a bombing in Ireland, a demonstration in Rhodesia or a high-jacking in Turkey. We see them in our living rooms almost as soon as they happen. We have become part of the one world we live in and we cannot escape from it. James Russell Lowell's words ring in my ear, "New occasions teach new duties. Time makes ancient good uncouth", and I wonder what is the new good. Then I ask myself and you today, "Do I believe in a living God, that is alive and creating new things today?" We were offended, were we not, when some theologians told us that "God is dead"? Well, is He? Or is He alive and leading us into new ways of obedience right now? I happen to think, though many of you may disagree, that the recent treaty vote of the Senate is a new duty for our new day and I rejoice in it.

Some time ago I conducted a funeral service for one who had no church membership. In visiting with the family I was told that he was a good Christian though not a church member, which I presume to be possible, because he had tried to live by the Golden Rule. I try to do that also but I do not call myself a Christian on that account. I might even be a Buddhist, a Confucianist, a Hindu, a Jew or a humanist and hold to that very simple ethic. That is hardly the Christian fundamental to which I must return though I would hope we would abide by it.

I have been told to go back to the Ten Commandments and I believe that the Commandments are fundamental, but I wonder what we mean by saying get back to them. Advertising, as we know it today, plays upon my covetousness and I am afraid we have all disobeyed the Tenth Commandment again and again: "Thou shalt not covet." I find that almost all of us disobey the Fourth Commandment - "Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work." Rest on the seventh. But we require others to work for us even if we did not ourselves perform the functions of our employment, for we do want to have the utilities coming to our homes and stores open for our convenience. We have made for ourselves many gods - position, wealth, power, nation, race, social status, economic theory - and few of us have obeyed the very first of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." So go down the list of killing, lying, stealing, adultery, dishonoring father or mother, and see if we have even in the past built our Christian life on these enough to go back to a day when we did. Then see if the essence of our faith lies in them or in the words of Jesus, "I am come not to destroy the law but to fulfill it," telling us that the law of the Old Testament is not enough, but that there is something more basic and fundamental. I hear Jesus say, "You have heard of old, you shall not kill, but I say to you, love your enemy." Such obedience is still to be had in the future.

What more is basic? The Bible? Yes, of course we who are Protestant and Presbyterian have always taken the Bible as our primary authority. But what does the Bible say? To me it says, "Keep our eyes fixed on Jesus on whom faith depends from start to finish." It never tells me that I must believe the Scriptures for their own sake but that I must believe God and trust in Him for my salvation, and that God was in Christ, so that I must look to Jesus the Christ as the root

and foundation for my faith and the source of life. He is the one that the Bible tells about and by knowing Him I begin to know something of God the Father.

If my experience is correct - perhaps I had better say the reading of my experience is correct - and something like yours, the challenging thing to me is that this Jesus seems always to be ahead of me. He beckons me to follow Him and in following I never seem to catch up. The learning process is never finished. There is always something new to experience each day that helps me know the ways of the Lord. I am told to forget the things that are behind and stretch out to the things that are before. If I had to determine the text of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount I would say it is "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness." The key words are to "Seek the Kingdom", for the Kingdom is at hand, almost within reach - not something that is only in the past. It is to be sought.

Jesus faced the scholar Nicodemus who came searching for the truth - the fundamentals of faith - and Jesus told him, "You must be born again" into a new creature made by God's Spirit. The central thing that is needed is to be something new, not something old. Nicodemus was not told to go back to the law of Moses but to look to the new day of which the prophets spoke - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and others. The day is to come when the Lord will reign in all His glory - when swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks" and when all people will recognize the supremacy of God in their lives. If you have been watching the movie Holocaust you might, with me, wonder how that will ever be. But do we realize that the New Testament closes in the last two chapters of the Book of Revelation, not by saying, "This wraps it up, it is now done and completed, The work of God through Christ is over." Rather, it says there is still something new, still something ahead to be achieved. "Come, Lord Jesus, Come" is the way the writer puts it. The New Testament ends with a dream of the day when there shall be no more tears, suffering will be at an end, battles done. There will no longer be any separation between God and man. Indeed "it doth not appear what we shall be."

We find it easy to speak of the backwardness of some of the undeveloped countries or even of a country with a great culture such as China. If this is true it seems to me partly at least a result of a backward look that is part and parcel of their religious outlook. The Buddhist who does not accept the human desires but tries to run away from the real world, and the Confucianist who has always looked back to a golden age that existed 2500 years ago in the time of Confucius. The Christian faith, on the other hand, has always lived by a dream - the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, a kingdom where righteousness reigns, an unfolding of life still to come, the dream of Martin Luther King when racism no longer exists, a dream of renewal and progress toward God, the achieving of the impossible because God wants it so.

In the early Church the baptismal formula was very simple. To confess "Jesus Christ is my Lord" was all that was required. We have confused it in our day as we ask, "What do you believe about this and that? Do your beliefs correspond with mine? If they do we can worship together and we can receive you into our fellowship." But when the Philippian jailer asked Paul what he needed to do to be saved the answer was very clear: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." But this confession was more than the saying of so many words. It involved obedience to the Lord he had said was to be his lord. You recall the new commandment Jesus gave His disciples. It was to love one another as He had loved them. Then He goes on to say, "The man who has received my commands and obeys them - he it is that loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father." Obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ becomes the standard test for love.

Do you recall the test for love at the last judgment? The scene is the court room where Jesus is the judge. People and nations are brought before Him. He separates the sheep from the goats, the obedient from the neglectful or disobedient. The test was not that they knew the right words or had gone through the right ceremonies in their worship. It was something much more fundamental, even as He had said before, "not everyone that says Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom, but rather they that obey." No, to the one group He says, "Enter into the joy of the Lord", while to the other it was consignment to utter darkness. To one group it was "When I was hungry you gave me something to eat, or thirsty something to drink, naked you clothed me..." but to the other, "When I was hungry you did nothing, you gave me no food..." "We never did that," they said. "O yes, you did for when you did it to one of the least of my brethren you did it to me." And the others, "We did the right things. We believed, we worshipped, we went through ceremonies..." "But you never obeyed the law of love by doing the things that express that love."

It is fashionable to say the central theme of the Christian faith is love and so it is, but it is only true when that love leads to obedience and love for one another. Friends, we have never really been obedient. Our forefathers were not either. We too have worshipped the golden calves of wealth, efficiency, power and race. Obedience is still in the future.

I am quite sure I have not fully answered the question I posed at the beginning. Some of my fellow staff members chided me for putting in the news sheet (This Week at Broadstreet) that I would try to answer the question about direction to the fundamentals of our faith. I hope, however, I have shown that in my thinking and study I have pointed out that the direction we must go is not to some fine idea held in the past, some past obedience upon which we can rely. Upon the past we must build, to be sure, but that is only the root that gives us nourishment that we might grow and bear fruit and be established in a new and unfolding world, new creatures in Christ. As a boy I delighted in singing loud and vigorously, "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, With the cross of Jesus going on before." I still delight in it though not in the militaristic note that is sounded, but in the note of confidence, and that the cross is still before us and calls for advance,

Only now do I come to my text: (as expressed in the New English Bible translation) "And what of ourselves?" This verse from Hebrews comes after the writer has given us the list of the faithful in the 11th chapter, "With all these witnesses of faith around us like a cloud, we must throw off every encumbrance, every sin to which we cling, and run with resolution the race for which we are entered, our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom faith depends from start to finish,

The Resurrection was the theme of the early church, not anything that had previously been experienced. What kept the early Christians strong in the face of persecution was the promise of a new creation, not the stability of the old creation; a new humanity, not the old or existing community of people; a new dream of peace and well-being, not the pattern of the old peace by the power of arms. Before them lay a new world of love and obedience, a new world of freedom and life, a new dream of God's living with them and directing them into all truth and goodness because the fundamental of faith was the love for and obedience to a God like Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead to bring hope and salvation to a dying world. The Holy Spirit was with them, in them, guiding them, constantly leading them forward with courage to a new day. Forward then to the fundamentals of our faith, not glorying in the past with all its greatness, but glorying in the prospects of new life, new faith, new strength as we follow the Christ who is ever before us.

I cannot close without sharing with you a poem that has meant much to me. It was written by John Oxenham, a liberal theologian of the 20th century: "Where Are You Going, Greatheart?"

"Where are you going, Greatheart,
With your eager face and your fiery grace?
Where are you going, Greatheart?"

"To fight a fight with all my might,
For Truth and Justice, God and Right,
To grace all life with His fair Light."
"Then God go with you, Greatheart!".....

"To lift Today above the Past;
To make Tomorrow sure and fast;
To nail God's colors to the mast."
"Then God go with you, Greatheart!".....

"To break down old dividing lines;
To carry out my Lord's designs;
To build again His broken shrines."....

"Where are you going, Greatheart?"
"To set all burdened peoples free;
To win for all God's liberty;
To 'stablish His sweet sovereignty."
"God goeth with you, Greatheart!"

It is indeed a new humanity Jesus came to establish, a new community of love and brotherhood, a new discipleship of obedience and service, all under the guidance of the living God whom we know as the Holy Spirit. He is leading us into all truth. He is leading us to a day of peace and fulfillment. The faith of direction? It is always to go forward with confidence. "In the world you will have tribulation", to be sure, but Jesus went on to add, "but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." We live - the day of resurrection - God is alive.

We praise Thee for leading us to new truth in our pilgrimage. Now may we follow Thee unafraid to new solutions in our search for Thy Kingdom in our day.
Amen.